DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 004 PS 024 719

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TITLE Supporting the Child's Development by Developing the Group Dynamics Experiences from the Supervision of Educators.
PUB DATE Sep 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association Conference (6th, Lisbon, Portugal, September 1-4, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; Classroom Environment; Cooperation; Cooperative Learning; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Group Behavior; *Group Dynamics; *Group Experience; Groups; Group Structure; Organizational Communication; Planning; Supervision; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Germany

ABSTRACT

This report, the third annual study of primary program implementation, outlines case study observations of learning groups and of teachers relations to groups. The learning atmosphere of a learning group is determined by presence of conducive or disruptive elements, input of children, and relation of the group to the teacher, in addition to good pedagogical practice. In order to advance children's development, good working relations with individual children and with the whole learning group are needed. Group work generally only takes into account the way children in a learning group are composed into the group, without considering the group as a social system. A supportive relationship is important to improved group learning and to instructor's relationship with groups. After an initial discussion of learning groups, experiences of individual teachers are described. Supervision groups and group-experience groups are mentioned, including how supervision, self-experience, and theory can become three interlinked elements of child development. (BGC)

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Supporting the Childs Development by Developing the Group Dynamics Experiences from the Supervision of Educators

ED 401 004

Educational work with children generally means educational work in groups (and institutions). Whatever educational establishment one looks around in (at least in Germany), the problems which educators have with individual children, and which they perceive as a help or a hindrance to development, are mostly interpreted as the childs problems. This or that child is disruptive because it comes from this or that family, because it has a metabolic disorder, because it is in the wrong learning-group, and so on. The generally accepted theory is that a disruptive child will draw all the teachers attention to itself until there is some kind of outbreak of aggression (a development that is observed with concentrated attention by the rest of the group). The disruption caused by a particular child can sometimes reach a point where not only the teacher, but the rest of the children in a learning group are deeply disrupted, if not brought to a complete standstill, in their learning process.

Whether childrens development is advanced or hindered depends not only on the good or bad methodological design of a play-session or teaching-session, but also on the presence of a favourable or unfavourable atmosphere in a learning group. The learning atmosphere is determined by the presence of conducive or disruptive elements in learning relationsi.e. the helpful or obstructive interventions of teachers, the input, both positive and negative, of the children, and, lastly, the overall good or bad relations of the group to its teacher or amongst the children themselves.

Seen in this light, what is needed, if childrens development is to be advanced, is not only good pedagogical planning, but also the creation of good working relations with individual children or with the whole learning group. As a rule, this processknown as group workgenerally only takes into account the way children in a learning group are to be composed into that group, without taking into consideration that the group, as a medium for learning, is a social system with its own set of rules. In other words, even the best-laid plans for promoting development can go awry when the stage of development reached by a group does not match the methods and subject-matter planned for the class, when the working relations within the learning group are too ill-defined, or when there is an imbalance between work on the content and work on the group relationsto name but a few of the crucial factors in group dynamics.

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The kind of block in development that occurs when the groups natural momentum is suppressed is best illustrated by the classic mode of classroom teaching. This front-of-class type of teaching leads to an almost total suppression of autonomous participation in the group, and thus also to a split into at least three groups: one that is so interested in the what there is to learn that it will benefit from it, whatever the situation; another group that is more or less uninterested but which, in an unenthusiastic and stationary way, at least persists with the learning opportunities; and a

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third group that will rebel, either overtly or covertly, against the teachers treatment. In addition, there are the sympathies and antipathies in the educatorclient relationship, which emerge in a particularly blatant way in this style of teaching. The pupil who is liked benefits from the teaching relationship; his or her development moves forward. The rejected pupil switches off and responds to the rejection, mirror-fashion, with aggression.

It is a source of constant surprise to see how judgement of the different factors involved in promoting development varies depending on ones point of view: from the standpoint of a group-member, the breakdown of the learning and development process can have completely different causes from those perceived by the group-leader or teacher. In this connection, a student-teacher had the following experience.

When the student sat in on a class taken by her supervisora person she regarded as strict but somehow also very likeablethe pupils were sitting in a large horseshoe-shape (there were also two desks set crosswise at the front, with one deskthe teacherspositioned outside the horseshoe).

Were in a German lesson. It begins with a song which everyone sings together. The pupils are told to open their books. Everyone except Thomas, sitting opposite the teachers desk, has their book in front of them. Thomas is digging about very noisily in his school bag. He throws things out, one after the other, onto the desk, apparently without taking any notice of his fellow-pupils or the two teaching staff. The teacher again gives Thomas very precise instructions. All background chatter stops. All eyes are on the two individuals involved in the actionThomas, still calmly digging about in his bag, but now standing up, and the teacher, who has come up to within half an arms length from him. Within a few seconds, the atmosphere in the classroom has become highly charged, and then comes the release of emotion: the teacher shouts at Thomas, saying he should hurry up and get his book out. And he actually does this very quickly, and after a little toing and froing, he also finds the right page.

The teacher is now sitting directly in front of him on a chair. Sarah, a very good, active pupil, begins to read. She gets a lot of praise and acknowledgement from the teacher. While Sarah is reading, Thomas tries to provoke the girl sitting next to him by constantly shoving her. When the teacher notices this, she immediately tells Thomas off and asks him to read. He reads very haltingly, and its obvious how much effort each word costs him. When he cant read a word properly, Sarah corrects him, until the teacher stops her doing this. After reading aloud, Thomas announces, in a very loud voice, that he is now going to leave the classroom and go to a special reading-class with Kevin, a boy with a hearing disability, and the special-needs teacher.

The student describes the teacher as unfriendly and inclined to overreact. If she were a child, she says, she would be frightened of her, or of her way of reacting by making the children feel bad. At any rate, she is not, according to the student, an ideal teacher. Sometimes, she says, she felt embarrassed by the rough, abrupt way the teacher answered the children, or showed them up in front of the whole class. On the other hand, she was impressed by her kind gestures (such as stroking the tops of the childrens heads, or comforting them). When children were afraid to go

home, she would offer to accompany them or to ring up their mothers. This aroused sympathetic feelings in the student-teacher. She herself had sometimes longed for just this sort of treatment when she was at school. As regards Thomas she says: I like Thomas; he has a clumsy but loveable way about him. With a lot of attention and patience, he would manage to stay in the class. On the other hand, I am amazed at him. The things he dares to do! His fellow-pupils undoubtedly feel the same way as I do. And about Sarah she says: Sarah is a model pupil. I have a real aversion to herI think because she quite clearly shows off her superior knowledge in relation to the other pupils. I would prefer not to have her in the class. Her manner disturbs me and puts me off.

The student-teacher then tried to prepare a lesson with this class. In doing so, she concentrated on making the subject-matter as interesting as possible, and she decided to pay as little attention as possible to Thomass disruptive behaviour. The upshot was as follows: My resolution not to pay any attention to Thomass disruptive behaviour was a complete flop. While I was giving out work-sheets and the relevant instructions, there was a thumping and crashing to the side of me. Thomas was throwing his neighbours pencil-case and his own pencils around. Sarah remarked that she had everything already out on the desk as I had instructed, and she asked if she could get on and start the work. The girls sitting round her also began working. Thomas was now being so disruptive that, contrary to my resolution, I stood in front of him and shouted very loudly at him that he should calm down, leave his fellow-pupil in peace, and get on with his work. I saw from his expression that he was satisfied that he had finally been taken notice of as usual.

This example highlights two things: first, that identification with the pupils leads to the perception of great tensionstensions, which, furthermore, are different from those registered by the teacher. From the standpoint of the pupils or group, it is Sarah who is disruptive, whereas Thomas not only gets sympathy, but is actually admired for his ability to protest. From the teachers standpoint, Sarah is a mainstay of her (the teachers) lessons, whereas Thomas, besides being the worst pupil, constantly sabotages her attempts to advance the groups development. It is easy to see that it is mainly the children who can be used by the teacher as props against the rest of the group who benefit from this style of group-management.

These brief observations on the relationship between the teacher and the learning group are intended to show that for a teachers relationship to his or her learning group to be conducive to group development, a professional approach to group dynamics is required. What form would a style of group management that gave all children an equal chance of development take; and how might one learn such management?

2

The first task is to define the notion of the group, and to do so in a way that allows for the fact, firstly, that no action directed by the group-leader at a particular child remains without effect for all the other children, and, secondly, that no action by a particular child within the group comes

about without some overt or covert commentary from, or indeed the instigation of, the group. So, in the example quoted: Thomas acts for Sarahs benefit, and Sarah for Thomass, and both act for the benefit of the whole group *vis-à-vis* the teacher. What should we make of this?

Sarah is keen to learn; she expects the teacher to provide optimum learning-conditions. Thomas too would like to learn; after all, he too is interested in receiving approval, praise, endorsement of what he does.

Sarah can use Thomas as someone who causes the teacher to endorse Sarahs desires for acknowledgement and approval. Furthermore, Thomas provides her with the ideal means of demonstrating her superiority: with Thomas as a foil, praise of her, and the positive attention of the teacher is guaranteed. For Thomas, on the other hand, relief comes only when, having been disadvantaged by the learning conditions, he is finally able to leave the classroom.

All this is very easy to conceive of, and finds plausible explanation in the specialist literature on group dynamics. In practice, however, it becomes clear that there are two factors, at least, which make recognition of these kinds of connections extremely difficult:

1.equally; he or she ought to be fair, and gear his or her relations to the group as a whole. On the other hand, they think he or she should concentrate on individuals, probably in order to arouse the envy of the others and secure a special status for those individuals, thus compensating for unfairness which they have experienced up to then in their lives (key word: sibling rivalry).

2.a turning towards the father that is supported equally positively by the father and the mother (key word: single-parent child). Firstly, family relations are not necessarily characterized by permanent harmony between the parents. Secondly, the conditions that prevail during early socialization are characterized by the private nature of family relations (as opposed to relations in public institutions). In other words, there is no way of publicly monitoring successful detachment. Such detachment would be a precondition for being able to take the developmental steps from the motherchild relationship, via the motherfatherchild relationship, to the position of being able to relate to a larger number of people simultaneously, without evoking the feeling in the parents that if I pay attention to one, the other one will automatically become envious. Persisting in dyadic relationship-patterns inevitably leads to the groups behaving as in the failed family-situation, and splitting into a tension-filled triadic structure comprising the group-leader, the group, and the disruptive child (with the latter being perceived as something that seeks to draw all the attention to itself, against the rest of the group).

Learning to interpret the feelings aroused in group-leaders in response to such situations is not a matter of theory but of on-the-job supervision and self-experience (in cases where it is not possible to deal with the situation intuitively). Being able to see the feelings evoked by the group as a mirror of the problems within the group, and being able to make diagnostic use of them in order to arrive at a new mode of behaviour, is a long and sometimes arduous process. To enter into that process, one needs a group as a testing-ground, in which the teacher can come to learn

that, no matter who the leader is, nothingbe it positive or negativehappens in the group that does not depend in some way on all those involved in the group. One also needs feedback, a reflective or mirroring process, and opportunities to transfer experiences from the pedagogical field to the group and, conversely, from the mirroring group to the pedagogical field. And lastly, one needs to come to see that almost everything with which a group deals, either consciously or unconsciously, relates to what is happening at that moment within the group itself.

One has to have got to know ones own role in this process, in order to apply this kind of conduct to a group of children. And even then, there will be the possibility that the energies of the group will push in a direction that evokes blind reactions from the teacher. Thus, a special teacher who had cared for Anna, a severely disabled seven-year-old, for eighteen months, wrote as follows about her experiences in her supervision group:

It was only towards the end of the period of care that I really began to work in a way that took account of group processes (because of our good relationship, what I could offer in terms of support was more positive). In the middle of the period of care in particular, I was too trammelled up in the relational level to be able to be of professional help to the girl. I think I managed to find my way out of these uncertainties and confusions thanks to my intuition and the lead which the girl gave me (balance of relational and support work). I cannot get over how independent Annette was in developing her social competences within the framework of the care, and how I merely had to follow her lead. All I needed to offer her was a supportive relationship from which she could develop.

I should now like to give an account of some experiences teachers had in a supervision context, and of how these experiences considerably improved the opportunities for development of children in their care.

3

A worker in a local-authority *Kinderhort* [child-minding establishment for children of all agesTr.] describes the following occurrence. Two girls, Renate and Karin, were suspected of having gone into the work-area after lunch, put glue on the work-benches, glued together pictures by other children and teachers, glued up the large paper-guillotine, and written the name of another girl in glue on a chair. Both girls denied the deed right up to the last minute, although everything pointed to their having done it. In the end Karin said: The glue-bottle looked so sad standing on the shelf. What is one to make of such an action? And of the girls refusal to admit what they had done? How should one respond to something like this in pedagogical terms? Something that no one understandsnot even the girls, who didnt cite any proper motives, but instead talked about a sad glue-bottle?

Everyday life in institutions which mostly work with children consists not only of many scenarios in which the individuals unconscious is bound up in the dominant relational patterns,

but also of this kind of puzzling *mise en scène* by individual children or subgroups. In my experience, the way one deals with these kinds of events, these kinds of oddities, is in most cases similar to the way in which one deals with ones own dreams: they are noted, and filed away as something odd, something incomprehensible. Dreams, and perhaps also the kinds of scenes described, are like unread books (as the Talmud says). Someone who suspects that dreams contain important messages will generally, at best, simply make a note of them. Only someone who privately realizes, or has realized, the importance which these messages can have for their own development is, perhaps, in a position to deal with these kinds of experiences in a comprehending way.

On close inspection, this does not seem particularly professional. Something very obvious, and, to judge by the reactions of the educators, very important is going on, and no one knows how to deal with it. Or, to put it the other way round: through the symbolic language of their actionsthat is to say, the unconscious playing-out of their (relational) problemschildren are attempting to express something and are not being understood. What can be done with this? How else can children make themselves understood, except through their own language, which they are justified in hoping will be understood by teachers, and even by children?

If we look a little more deeply at the account given by the worker from the *Kinderhort*, it becomes clear that there is a lack of bonding there. This is not surprising for such a place, since even the teachers complain that they hardly have a chance to foster a cohesive group-culture. The children come at different times, have to do different homework, and want to develop friendships outside the *Kinderhort* as well. Too many parents fetch their children whenever they feel like it, so none of the staff knows exactly what the composition of the group will be the following day. The *Kinderhort* is too constrained by its status mid-way between home and schooli.e as a sort of organized post-school facility offering supervised homework-sessions

On closer inspection, the lack of bonding turns out to be a lack full stop. The girl whose name was written in glue on the chair had struck teachers as being particularly greedy at mealtimesa greed that also manifested itself in other areas of the *Kinderhort*s activity. In another case, Karin stuck bits of adhesive paper onto childrens backs with various accusations on them. One of these stated that a child had been stealing at the *Kinderhort*. Where there is an insufficiency, where, because of inadequate bonding in the group, there is no opportunity to manage the group-related affairs in such a way that the group is as balanced as possible, the childrenand the staff as wellhave to fend for themselves. Everybody grabs what they can. In actual fact, there is enough to go round. To use the eating metaphor: there are enough children who do not want to eat, so that, paradoxically, the teachers are forced into the situation of having to restrain some from eating whilst forcing others to do so. This, again, is not very conducive to bonding in the group.

Crazy signals such as the enactment described above (The bottle was so sad) are thus like a cry for help that fails to be understood, and fails to be understood mainly because only in supervision, and through discussion of the experiences with ones own affinity group (the team) is it possible to relate the actions of the two girls to the group as a whole. For the teaching staff, the

aberration of two girls became an important indicator of their own state: it was not just the group of children that expressed itself in this enactment, but also, and above all, the situation of the teachersin other words, the whole set of preconditions for development. Removing the obstacles to the teams development thus decisively improved the childrens own opportunities for development.

4

A supportive relationship is one of the essential preconditions if one wants to venture onto the path of enlightened dealings with groups. This means bringing the educational objectives into balance with the affective processes within the learning group. And this in its turn means having substantially to modify traditional principles of pedagogical operation. An enlightened approach requires both a dialogue-based understanding of teaching and an optimum structuring of the institution in which the teaching takes place.

The special teachers in the above examples had the support of the supervision group to fall back on, and the supervision group improved support in the team (improvement of reciprocal links). These links were particularly crucial when the special teachers were going through phases of deep disillusionment and confusion and were able to call on the reflective potential of the group.

But support, however important, is not enough to enable one to learn how to foster the development of the group of children in ones charge. Another necessary factor is the reflective potential offered by the supervision group. In most cases, what is experienced with individual children in the group is mirrored in the supervision groupinitially without this being realized. This phenomenon helps one, via a process of self-experience, to become sensitive to group dynamics in a way other than through reading literature on the subject.

In this connection, the processes by which one gains insight are not confined to present events in the supervision group; they can extend right into the later evaluation phase. Hence, a *rapporteur* at a group supervision meeting writes that: Writing up the report was very difficult for me. I often felt the need to stand up and do something else. And I sometimes gave way to this feeling. Only after a second supervision-session with my colleague [about the case which the *rapporteur* had to describeC. B.] did I manage to find some kind of descriptive structure in what for me was also a chaotic muddle (although I still had to stop myself from running away). This feeling (I just want to get out and away) was exactly the same as that experienced by.my colleague in the supervision group in regard to her clients mother. My emotions seem to mirror my colleagues whole situation, and it is only this that has made them comprehensible to all of us: the chaos in the clients family-structure extends right into the structure of my report (C. Hitzel). With the help of the *rapporteurs* feelings, the group has here been able to be of help to the colleague reporting her experiences, to see her feelings as a mirror of her clients domestic situation. This has both relieved the burden on her and opened up a new point of access into her clients lifeand thus also a new developmental vista.

Another advantage that ensues when case-descriptions are reflected back onto group experience is the greater clarity one gets about problems of development from the internal and external conditions of group-work. Precisely at the point when one experiences the institutional conditions of educational work as extremely inhibiting, feedback from the supervision group can be helpful in reflecting the strategies being used in relation to colleagues. Thus, another *rapporteur* writes that During supervision, it becomes clear that the colleague concerned is trying to get the group to criticize the institution on her behalf. Fearful of the possible consequences, she herself avoids engaging in a clarificatory discussion with colleagues from the institution. Just as we feel commandeered for this task, so she feels commandeered by the institution. It suddenly becomes clear that she herself is maintaining an arrested position that is also depriving her client group of the opportunity for development. She will have to decide one way or the other (C. Bienwald).

Something that would have an even more far-reaching impact than supervision groups would be group-experience groups. Here, teachers could learn to marry their group experience as participants with their behaviour as leaders in such a way that disruption could be put to productive use for the development of the group. Supervision, self-experience, and theory can thus become three interlinked elements of developmentand these elements are, indeed, built into many advanced training opportunities.